

PERSONNEL ADMINISTRATION IN THE
UNITED NATIONS



Lecture delivered at the Indian Institute of
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by
MR. J.A.C. ROBERTSON
Director of Personnel, United Nations

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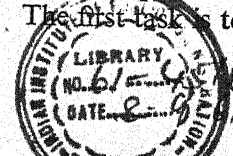
(Text of a lecture delivered by Mr. J.A.C. Robertson,
on Wednesday, the 1st May, 1957)

Prof. V.K.N. Menon (Director) :

Before we begin the proceedings, I would like to say on behalf of the Institute how glad we are to have Mr. Robertson with us tonight; as you know, he holds a very important key post in United Nations Organisation. He is going to address us on the subject of "Personnel Administration in the United Nations". We had to give him a very short notice, but he was kind to ignore its shortness and agreed to come here. I would like to thank Mr. Lall also for kindly agreeing to preside on the occasion. When I looked around for a possible Chairman for this evening, I could not think of anyone better fitted to occupy the chair than the distinguished former Assistant Secretary-General of the United Nations. As I do not propose to say anything at the end of the meeting, I will take this opportunity of welcoming both of them once more to the Institute and thanking them on behalf of the Institute for the trouble they have taken in coming here this evening.

Shri S. Lall (Chairman) :

I deem it a great privilege to introduce to you today's speaker, Mr. Robertson, the Director of Personnel, United Nations. He is going to address you on the subject of personnel administration in the United Nations. Unfortunately, I had not the good fortune to work with him because he joined the U.N. after I left. But I know something of the job which he is doing in the United Nations and I should like to assure you that that job is no bed of roses. The job Mr. Robertson has to do with personnel can be divided into three main tasks: The first task is to recruit personnel



not in one place but from the four corners of the globe, i.e., from 81 member-States and to bring them to New York. The recruitment has to be both of men and women, as the Charter provides that there must be no discrimination between the two. The staff must also be of the highest competence. That is the first condition. The second criterion, which I think is also very important, is that there must be proper geographical distribution. You might be interested to know how Mr. Robertson is carrying out this very difficult duty imposed upon him by the Charter. Then, having brought his men from all parts of the world to New York City, his job is to make them live together. It is, what in the political language, is known as the problem of co-existence. It is not only living together or existing together but working together in a team which is the essence of the Secretariat work. Anyone who has anything to do with the Secretariat, knows that if members of the Secretariat do not work as a team, the Secretariat will not function properly. That then is his second job: to get the international staff to work as a team.

The third part of the job is to keep the personnel happy and contented and also to keep them interested in the job; because if they are not interested in the job, neither will they be happy nor efficient. In our local Secretariat, keeping an interest in the job is not so difficult as it is to maintain interest at the United Nations headquarters; because here if you are working, say, in connection with the Damodar Valley Authority, you can know first hand what is happening and realize its importance. But there at New York you just work in a large Headquarters building amid impressive surroundings, but you do not see the fruits of your labour. I remember when I was in the Central Secretariat in New Delhi, I often used to envy doctors and engineers. A doctor could see the life that he saved and he could also see the life that he failed to save. So also an architect sees the building which is constructed and can find out whether it is good or bad. But a Secretariat official keeps on noting and noting on files; the results are not as clearly visible. I think the personnel of the United Nations are worse off in this regard because

they cannot see, as clearly as even members of the national Secretariat can see, the fruits of their labour.

Mr. Robertson's lecture tonight on "Personnel Administration in the United Nations" should be of special interest to us in two ways. Firstly, the United Nations is our organisation as much as it is of anybody else and we should take a lively interest in that organisation; and secondly, we have as great diversities within our country as are found within the United Nations Organisation. We have different castes, different creeds, and we know that sometimes provincialism takes a somewhat ugly and undesirable complexion. The United Nations Secretariat presents an exceptional blending of people of diverse cultures, traditions and languages, and the problems which arise from such a mixing together have some similarities with those which crop up in this sub-continent of ours.

Mr. Robertson entered the Home Civil Service in Britain in 1935 and joined what was then the India Office. Fortunately for himself, fortunately for the United Nations and fortunately for us, he left it after six months and went into the Treasury where he remained right through holding high important positions. The British Treasury has built up remarkably sound traditions. It has acquired a reputation of getting the best results from scarce resources and personnel. And in this respect there appears to be a fundamental difference between the British practice and the American practice. In the United Nations both practices have been tried. If an organisation has a very large financial resources, the American practice will be more suitable. But if you are short of finance, then there is everything to be said for the British system, which I am sure gives more value for money than any other system for the simple reason that every bit of expenditure is carefully watched and results are carefully scrutinised, analysed and assessed. I have no doubt that in selecting Mr. Robertson, for the very important job in the United Nations which he holds today, the U.N. Secretary-General had prominently in mind the virtues of treasury practice in the U.K. It was obviously for that reason that he selected such an important and highly

qualified and well-proven officer of Mr. Robertson's calibre.

Mr. Robertson :

Mr. Chairman, ladies and gentlemen, it is a privilege to have this opportunity of meeting this new and important extension of the brotherhood Public Administration, sitting at the side of your distinguished Chairman and Member of the United Nations Old Boys' Association and of addressing you in my mother-tongue.

When this talk of mine is over, I hope that it is your custom to allow of a few questions to be put to the speaker, both so that others may have a chance to express themselves and so that your speaker may learn from other practitioners or students in the field of administration, how best to pilot and steer this pioneering work of international endeavour past the rocks of present emergency into calmer although deeper water.

For the United Nations is passing through difficult waters, in a time of emergency. It is an emergency organization and very likely may always remain so. Moreover, it is a young and a growing organization. And as is characteristic of the young, we in the United Nations are very much at an age and stage when our beliefs influence our behaviour. The beliefs of the United Nations are, in part, written into the Charter as such. But history is breathing life and strength each day into the Charter, as opportunity arises and is seized or frittered away day by day. What does this mean to the Administration of the United Nations? And here may I remind you that the Secretary-General is *inter alia* the chief administrative officer, not merely of the United Nations Secretariat but of the Organization. I will give you my personal answer. It is that the Administration of the United Nations must keep step, and change step with the changing pattern of events in the world outside the Organization that reflect itself in an ever changing pattern of work. And the most important consequence of this fact is that we must have, working for the world

organization, the type of people, both constantly and in series, who can change with the times; and we must provide for them administrative framework which can synthesise their beliefs and behaviour. It is my belief that in this way we who serve the United Nations can best play our part—to quote the words of one of my senior colleagues, the Under-Secretary of the Department of Public Information—in what he describes as "... further enlargement of our concept of the world organization; regarding it... not merely as a step forward in our political thinking but as a step forward in the great human adventure of which politics, even international politics, is but a part..."*

II

At the beginning of the paper to which I have just referred and which, perhaps, I may be permitted warmly to commend to you in its entirety, mention is made of the factor of size. Certainly, it is a significant fact that the increase in the membership of the United Nations from sixty to eightyone has been a long step towards universality. This stride forward is not unfraught with consequences for the Secretary-General and for his Director of Personnel. Yet, I make bold to say that size is not the heart of the matter. The United Nations Secretariat with 1173 internationally-recruited staff throughout the world and a combined total staff including locally-entered staff members of some 4000, and a Budget of a little over \$50 million a year, is not, after all quantitatively speaking, a very big show. Here in Delhi, you see the illustration: a little band of people, if one takes both the Information Centre and the staff of the Office of the Resident Representative of the Technical Assistance Board, whose numbers could easily be counted on the fingers of two hands. The significance and the influence of the United Nations and of the work of its staff, does not at all rest on quantitative considerations. Its influence lies in the world of ideas. Those who serve the United Nations, on a career basis or for the time being, are alike dedicated to an idea. Our aim is to enlarge the

* PARLIAMENTS, PRIESTS & PROPHETS—Foreign Affairs, April 1957—by Ahmed S. Bokhari.

area throughout the world of co-operation with the United Nations in the finding of peaceful solutions, as well as of promoting economic development and social betterment. The servants of the United Nations are a band of missionaries, having a specific creed, and privileged and responsible for projecting their message to all interested people throughout the area in which they can make and create contact and influence.

In any event, to judge from personal experience based on the days when I was concerned with the question of the optimum size of the British Civil Service just after the Second World War, size is pre-determined by policy decisions governing functions and ranges of duties. In the case of the United Nations, one of the biggest decisions affecting its size was to select New York as the Headquarters of the Organization; another important decision was that, again, since it had been decided by the Member Governments that the sessions of the General Assembly and of the principal organs of the United Nations should be serviced in several working languages, there is no escaping the consequence of the requirement of a large number of language-service staff whose numbers were included in the overall figure I gave you earlier but whose numbers fall outside the 1173. Moreover, and so that I want no risk of leaving you with the impression that the UN Secretariat is geared only to mere 'servicing' operations, an expansion of staff and of costs is inescapable once it has been decided as a matter of policy to move forward in international work for economic development and technical assistance and more broadly into social welfare work. Hence, in spite of my endemic or nostalgic concern for the general objectives of economy and efficiency in staffing matters throughout the UN Secretariat, I will turn now to what is my day-to-day concern—to insure the best possible management of the people who make up that Secretariat. At this point, I would like to deal specially with recruitment.

III

Recruitment is vital to any organization and service. In the United Nations its importance cannot possibly be

under-estimated : and because of the interest which I suspect my listeners have in the subject, I would like to treat it fairly fully, especially as the subject of recruitment can readily be separated in treatment from the other very important employer-functions which concern me as Director of Personnel continuously—transfer, promotion, discipline, training, staff welfare, retirement.

Recruitment in the United Nations is of three kinds : recruitment of permanent staff; recruitment of short-term staff on a basis of secondment from national governments or from institutions, universities and the like; and recruitment of experts for the United Nations Technical Assistance Programme.

The last of these, though falling rather outside my terms of reference, deserves a special mention, as I am not sure how much attention it obtained at your meeting on 13th April last. It is not generally known that the Office of Personnel acts as an independent Civil Service Commission for the Technical Assistance Administration. Working in the closest consultation with that Administration, a branch of the Office of Personnel, called the Technical Assistance Recruitment Services, is responsible under my direction for recruiting technical assistance experts in the UNTAA Programme, in response to the demands put forward by the TA Administration, who in their turn, are in touch with governments as to requirements and who deal with governments through the TAB Resident Representatives. The Technical Assistance Recruitment Services have the task of going out to seek UN Technical Assistance experts and seeing that there is a fair field and no favour as between various candidates who come forward and who are recommended. The general opinion, and I speak here only as a servicing agent, is that these recruiting arrangements have been a great success.

I now turn to permanent recruitment. It is a fact that ours is a largely permanent international secretariat. In this way, the organization can rely on having a hard core of dependable, trained men and women, drawn in practice

from over eighty different nationalities. It is this corpus of staff members who have borne the heat and burden of the day over the last ten years and who have been able to show, time and again, most dramatically perhaps in the rather hectic days of the Extraordinary and General Assembly meetings in New York last autumn, their capacity to cope with new situations—whether to serve the UN Emergency Force, to provide the administrative and clerical arrangements relating to the clearing of the Suez Canal, or what-not. I cannot now detain you with any extensive list of the very wide variety of duties these men and women perform. But if anybody here present should still think of civil servants as concerned wholly with forms and figures and desk-work, he should pay a visit to the tall building on the East River. Or perhaps better still, imagine how many staff movements and what quick and efficient improvisation were needed to set up a base-landing-force near Naples when the UNEF contingents began to collect, with their iron rations (in most cases), but (in some) with unsuitable uniforms and the wrong type of musket; lines of communication had to be set up, postal services organized, and then negotiated with the host governments, and a system of financial control and audit arranged. None of these things could have been done without our permanent and experienced staff members, who were exclusively used for this job. We did not turn to a single new recruit for the general staffing of this emergency and crucial operation.

Our permanent staff were at the outset somewhat variously recruited. Some were drawn, but on a basis that has since become permanent, from national foreign (and other) governmental services, on the introduction of senior officers themselves drawn from those services; others were drawn from those who had experience of civil affairs administration, bodies like UNRRA and the like. It is by now a commonplace to say that some of the recruitment done in the earlier stage was not a complete success; there has since been a systematic process of review, under an independent Chairman, to weed out the dispensable and to confirm the rest in their appointments. Today we have a

set policy of *deliberate* recruitment and the whole of recruitment is now centralized at headquarters where it is under my special charge, answering to the Secretary-General. Under the Charter, "the staff shall be appointed by the Secretary-General under regulations established by the General Assembly." There are similar provisions in the governing orders of the other UN Agencies and in practice the Secretary-General of the United Nations, like the Directors-General of the sister-agencies, finds and has decided that, as chief administrative officer, he must keep recruitment under his close and direct personal control, through the appropriately constituted channels and without recourse to an independent Civil Service Commission as intermediary. It may also interest you to know that the trend in the UN in regard to permanent recruitment is towards making a higher proportion of career appointments initially at the junior Professional level, subject to internal probation with "automatic advancement and on completion of successful probation, to the first journeyman level in the Professional category." Naturally, alongside this, there is regular opportunity for "class-to-class promotion" from the General Service category.

Finally, despite the very considerable administrative difficulties, I hold out the prospect that, before very long, competitive examinations will be extended to the filling of certain classes of junior professional vacancies, *e.g.*, posts of Junior Economists and Statisticians. We already have an open competition for language staffs and we would like to extend this well-tried method of entry though it could hardly be done all at once on a world-wide basis, considering how small is our regular annual intake of such staff.

Alongside the permanent staff, we are introducing a judicious element of staff into the Secretariat on a fixed-term basis, *i.e.*, on secondment from their regular employment and with a return ticket after, say, three years of service, with a break at the end of the first year if all does not go well on both sides. Such seconded staff, once they join the United Nations, are subject to the regular oath of office and code of conduct that governs all international civil servants.

Their conditions of service, including pay, are broadly speaking, very similar, with important and carefully devised differences as to superannuation, retirement benefits, etc. The purpose of this second source of recruitment is to obtain for the UN Secretariat the services as staff members, of people who wish to make their main contribution to public service in their respective countries, but who have the special ability combined with the will and the urge to take part in the international form of service. Recruitment of fixed-term staff is subject to the same close scrutiny and central control as that of the permanent staff. Of course, we come upon persons with the desired type of special ability and attitude by various means, one of which is observing the contribution they make as national delegates to various meetings of United Nations besides at and outside headquarters. The Executive Secretary of the Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East, who unfortunately was prevented from taking part in this meeting because of urgent UN business elsewhere, has mentioned to me that "talent-spotting" is one of the regular by-products of ECAFE meetings. Needless to say, the Secretary-General and I welcome it, within limits. The main limit, as I have been telling the governments I have been visiting in this area, is that though the initiative may come from a senior official of the United Nations for the approach to a particular individual, matters should quickly be put into regular channels again. In this way, we intend to insure three things: that the work of the national governments is not disturbed; that the career of the individual civil servant is not carelessly jeopardized; and—not unimportant—that the United Nations is protected, by the careful check-ups we make with the competent authorities, against any possibility of random errors in selection.

For the seconded civil servant who works with the United Nations has to be good. There cannot at any one time be more than a certain amount of them and it is a waste of opportunity to take the second best or the mediocre. And again, it does not take long for their colleagues serving on a career footing, who see such entrants being

introduced above them in the promotion ladder, to spot the mistake if they are anything but excellent in attitude and performance, but provided always that only the excellent—and I must add, keen and willing—are selected for secondment, the gain is potentially very great. There is a gain in experience and in competence and sometimes in liveliness and freshness of point of view. There is a check to any tendency, from which no bureaucracy is immune, of inbreeding. And finally, the national government services themselves should find it an advantage, in future years, to be able to turn to staff members who have taken part in our unique type of international co-operative administrative adventure.

An important development in recent years in the field of personnel administration in the United Nations related to the insistence placed by the Secretary-General upon the observance of the 'rule of law'. The United Nations had its own elaborate system of rules and regulations, framed by its parliamentary bodies; and these rules and regulations had to be applied strictly, at the times without much regard for considerations which were of a humane character but which could not obviously be taken into account. This was very important in the face of the various disruptive forces which tended to undermine the influence of the organisation. Obviously the 'rule of law' could not be observed in an international administration in the same way as in a national administration; but the increasing importance attached to its observance in recent years was an indicator of the growing strength of the organisation.

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QUESTIONS

Q. You have characterised the recruitment on a permanent basis as "an International Career Service". But is it really so when it is not made at a young age and not by a competitive examination? The present U.N. system of salary grades and narrow job specialisation impedes both horizontal and vertical mobility and prevents the development of an international civil service of a generalist-administrator

type. Why not recruit international civil servants as national civil servants are recruited in the U.K.?

Ans. The U.N. system of salary grades had been evolved in the context of establishing an International Secretariat which would employ persons from different nationalities. It would have been inappropriate to divide the staff into various 'classes', as in Great Britain or in India. The nature of work in the U.N. Secretariat was not, except for a limited number of posts, of purely administrative nature, i.e., the U.N. did not present vast administrative problems as a nation state did. In the circumstances comparisons with the types of services obtaining in a nation state were hardly valid. The personnel problems at the international level were different from those at the national level; and the best devices and methods evolved in the field of personnel could not be adopted at the international level without regard to certain considerations, both political and social. Recently the U.N. Salary Grades Committee had recommended combining of certain grades and Mr. Robertson said that he was personally in favour of these recommendations. The latest policy was to have job classifications not in very many details but in general terms. There was thus no longer the danger of over-specialisation.

Q. *How do you protect international civil servants employed in the United Nations from prosecution by their countries on grounds of holding beliefs or subscribing to policies which are different from those of the national government in power? Is the protection at present afforded adequate? If not, what are its consequences in terms of work efficiency?*

Ans. Mr. Robertson explained that the problem posed in question had not actually arisen, though there had been some pressure brought by the host country to bear upon the United Nations on grounds which she thought were perfectly justified. From a purely administrative point of view, the matter had to be considered in terms of its effects on efficiency and costs. Some of the personnel, whose continued employment had been objected to by the Government

of the member country of which they were nationals, had either been investigated and 'cleared' or not investigated at all. In either case, in view of the reflection thrown upon their integrity by the national government, it was hardly desirable to continue their employment. He was fully satisfied that the termination of their employment (of course, with due compensation) was in the interest of efficiency of work and the preservation of staff morale.

Q. *What steps have been taken by the United Nations to acclimatise the personnel drawn from different countries to the international climate in which they have to work at New York and to train them for their jobs?*

Ans. The United Nations operated an ambitious programme of orientation, special courses in languages and training on the job. The induction programme was conducted by the departmental administrative officer in co-operation with the departmental personnel officer. As regards the actual work a new employee was expected to do, he was mostly trained on the job by the immediate supervisor. The latter had to submit upon the trainee periodical reports regarding how he was getting along. There was also an advanced course in English language for officers of the higher grades. For promoting contacts between the staff, there was a Staff Council. Amenities such as cafeteria, swimming pool, free tickets for plays etc., had also been provided.

Q. *Is there any efficiency rating system in vogue in the U.N. Secretariat, if so, is there any appeal against efficiency rating?*

Ans. An elaborate efficiency rating system with different forms of reports for different categories of staff was in operation. An appeal could be made against the efficiency rating to the Director of Personnel.

Shri S. Lall (Chairman) :

I thank Mr. Robertson for his illuminating talk on a subject which is of great interest to us all. He has dealt

with it from a broad perspective and covered a wide range. The most important requisite for high staff morale is resourcefulness and vitality of interest. It is usually tested in an emergency. My own experience, as also of Mr. Robertson, shows that whenever there was a crisis in the United Nations the staff rose to the occasion. I would here like to refer again to the question of geographical distribution. My own feeling is that too much importance is being attached to a mathematical formula for geographical representation. It is not mathematical geographical representation which matters but 'spiritual' geographical representation. For instance, if Nepal has become a member of the United Nations, it is not necessary that an important post must immediately be found for a national of that country. But the U.N. personnel must be international in spirit, and in a broad sense, it must come from different areas, and there should be no over-concentration of a particular nationality. All this is necessary so that the points of view of different regions are heard and given fair and full consideration by the Secretary-General. If geographical distribution in this sense is observed, it will greatly strengthen the United Nations. And therefore I have every hope that we shall see a well-balanced and emotionally integrated Secretariat built up by the efforts of Mr. Robertson. There will be great improvements and I am sure that the cost factor will not be ignored.

